

“I’m freezing, Harold.”

His attention on the old house before them, Harold didn’t answer his wife’s complaint. Pale golden light leaked through gaps in the blinds covering the first-floor windows while the second floor slumbered in darkness. Built sixty or seventy years past, the house was a home no more, but a veterinary clinic. A brilliant white floodlight splashed across the front of the pale blue structure. Harold’s eyes didn’t register the color in the glare; he only knew it because he’d been here two days earlier, casing the place in daylight.

“Harold!” She whispered it fiercely and tugged on his sleeve.

He absently wrapped his arm around her shoulders, but his attention remained fixed on the house. Situated in an otherwise deserted block on a sparsely-populated road, it hid among the winter-bare trees, a loner or an outcast. A perfect target. Better still, the security light’s glare washed out the burglars’ white coats, white hoods, and white pants as cleanly as the house. They might have been one with the walls. At least, that’s what they’d been told. Harold felt terribly exposed here and stole a glance back at the road. Not that passersby were likely at this hour anyway. Even so, he planned to enter through a back window, where the trees would swallow any sounds they made.

He started forward, arm still around her, but she didn’t move. “What?” he asked sharply.

“Lights are on inside.”

“Just security lights.”

She leaned into him and shook her head. Her hair, long and thick, lightly stroked his arm.

“You backing out on me, Hannah?” Harold felt her tension in her touch. He knew her that well. After all, they’d been together for six years,

ever since Howard Community College, where he had been a pitcher on the school's baseball team and she an aspiring actress in the theater program. A mutual friend had introduced them, and Harold had fallen hard. Hannah's radiant smile, golden hair, and shapely body instantly attracted, and the eagerness with which she attached herself to a star athlete amply fed his ego. Hannah's prettiness and Harold's rugged good looks, together with the uncanny alliteration of their names, seemed to cast a spell about them that other students were loath to attempt to penetrate, preferring instead to regard them with a respect bordering on awe. Yet they'd ended up neither on the stage nor on the diamond, but here in the chill night.

Hannah shook her head a bit too emphatically. "Of course not." A good actress, she faked determination well. But she couldn't fool him. She wanted out of this, out of the cold, out of the danger, out of the whole business. Only loyalty kept her here. He admired her for that. Little had gone right for him since college. Hannah alone had stuck by him. Why? He'd never fathomed that mystery. Oh, he knew that once she had needed his protection, but those days were long gone, and here she was, still with him, defying the urge to run, standing firm by his side when she could have been sleeping warm and secure in a better man's bed.

"Come on." He tugged at her, and this time she moved.

"At least it'll be warm in there," she muttered.

They crept through the darkness along the left side of the house and came to the rear. A waning moon illuminated the landscape, its light dimmed now and again as ragged patches of cloud raced by. The date was December twenty-fourth, Christmas Eve; the time two-twenty in the morning; the temperature forty-one degrees with a stiff breeze that chilled them all the more. Somewhere inside the house lay their objective: a supply of morphine and ketamine, cash literally in liquid form.

They paused to check the four darkened windows that flanked the back door, two on each side. Here, too, a security light pretended to deter thieves while contrarily revealing to them every detail of their intended target. The light from within, washed out by the exterior glare, shone faint but steady.

Hannah took two pairs of latex gloves from her pocket and handed one pair to Harold. They pulled them on, careful not to rip them, then Harold eased up the short flight of wooden steps leading to the door, his footfalls quieter than a rabbit's. He gently rotated the knob. Of course it was locked, but it never hurt to check. No sense smashing things if the owner had invited them in. Leaning to the left, he felt around the nearest window, examined it in detail, and gingerly tried to push up the lower sash. Again, no luck. Again, none expected.

Hannah tiptoed up the steps while he worked and stood close behind him. "Hammer," she whispered, pulling the tool from her coat pocket and handing it to him like a nurse handing a scalpel to a surgeon.

He took the hammer and with a swift stroke smashed the pane, then cleaned the jagged shards from the sash with the head. Falling splinters chattered as they struck the floor inside. Once satisfied the opening was clean, he helped Hannah through the window. She moved so quietly she might have vanished, but in his mind Harold could see her go to the door, disarm the alarm with the code they had been given, and unlock the deadbolt. The door whispered open.

He slipped inside and eased the door shut, then took her face in his hands and kissed her on the forehead. She beamed, a dog basking in her master's approval.

The very next instant, the job went horribly wrong.

*

Social affairs had never been Detective Lieutenant Rick Peller's forte, although his late wife Sandra had possessed a knack for spur-of-the-moment entertaining. She could conjure what appeared to be perfectly planned, if simple, dinners with a wave of her hand. Whatever her secret to success, her husband had definitely not absorbed it. Since her death four and a half years before, he often felt her whispering at his side, but she had never offered advice on hosting a party.

So it was fortunate, he thought, that when he decided to light up the winter darkness with a small gathering of friends on the evening of Saturday, January fourteenth, Detective Sergeant Corina Montufar offered

to help. She took charge of planning, shopping, and cooking, and dragged Detective Sergeant Eric Dumas into the fray against his will. Under Montufar's management, the evening materialized as if by Sandra's magic. Peller secretly thought that maybe it had been.

In addition to the three of them, he had invited Montufar's brother Eduardo; Eduardo's wife Sylvia; Peller's next-door neighbor Jerry Souter; Tomio "Tom" Kaneko, the mathematician who had helped the detectives with a major case the previous spring; and Kaneko's wife Sarah. He had also invited Montufar's younger sister Ella, but she declined, having already made other plans. "I think she's got a new boyfriend," Montufar had confided to Peller. "Lately her wardrobe's gotten fancier."

Peller had no need to suggest that Dumas and Montufar each invite a friend. Although they had concealed it fairly well, he'd noticed the looks passing between them, the occasional meeting of hands, how frequently they met outside of work. Peller didn't think anyone else in the department had caught on, but he knew the pair better than most. Nor did their increasing closeness surprise him, although he did wonder how long the pretense would last. Or was it pretense? Maybe Montufar and Dumas themselves didn't fully understand their relationship.

But tonight Peller wasn't dwelling on that. He wanted to simply relax, enjoy some time with his friends, and carry on an intelligent, insightful conversation about something trivial. The evening didn't disappoint him. As the group worked their way through a tossed salad, a zippy chili, and a heaping basket of corn muffins, they launched into an intelligent, insightful conversation about the weather.

"What I don't get," Jerry Souter said, emphasizing his point with a wave of his spoon, "is how it can be so dang cold. Global warming? Ha! Coldest winter I remember. Snow as early as Thanksgiving, bay freezing over. That's global warming?"

A round of nods and affirmative murmurs emanated from the group. At ninety-three years of age, Souter's memory was the longest at the table, and his imposing ebony figure spoke vividly of his days in World War II. Jerry, Peller thought, would always be on the Italian Alps. .

“It does seem counterintuitive,” Dumas agreed. “But I’m sure Corina is perfectly comfortable.” He winked at her.

“I hate it.” Montufar didn’t need to remind anyone that she’d been born in Guatemala. “And so do you, Eduardo, so don’t start.”

Her brother closed his mouth hurriedly, then faked a crestfallen look and turned to Sylvia for help.

Sylvia rolled her eyes.

“Global warming,” Kaneko informed them in a classroom voice, “refers to the increasing average temperature of the whole planet, not to circumstances in any one location. Consider an illustration. Suppose you put your left hand in a bucket of almost frozen water with a temperature of thirty-two degrees. Then you put your right hand in a bucket of water with a temperature of one hundred twenty degrees, nearly hot enough to scald.” His eyes fairly sparkled as he paused for effect. “On average, the heat you experience is a little above room temperature.”

Everyone laughed.

Peller considered his chili and iced tea. “Good illustration, Professor. But that doesn’t change the fact that one can’t buy a decent winter coat here in the Piedmont.”

Surprised, Sarah Kaneko set down the muffin she’d been lifting to her mouth. “I can.”

“Yes, but you’re not used to New York winters. I’m from upstate. To me, the typical Howard County winter could be autumn. The fall after we were married, Sandra bought me a heavy parka. I only had it two seasons. I got rid of it after one winter down here. It never got cold enough to wear it.”

“She was one wonderful lady,” Souter proclaimed, his voice rich and vibrant.

Montufar and Dumas nodded. The other guests looked anywhere but at Peller.

Raising a spoonful of steaming chili in salute, Souter added, “This is a meal worthy of her.” He leaned towards Peller and added, “You didn’t cook it, did you?”

“Hey, now,” Peller laughed. “I’m not that bad of a cook.”

“Probably not. Guys in our position learn quick or starve.” He looked around the table, his intense eyes commanding the attention of the others. “It’s part of life, folks. I seen more death than any of you. Lots more. Every one of them a person worth remembering.”

Dumas pushed back from the table and set his napkin by his now-empty bowl. “I don’t mind remembering Sandra.” So quietly the others had to strain to hear, he added “It’s the living that bug me.”

“How so, son?”

Dumas looked around in surprise but said nothing. Peller wondered if his colleague had inadvertently voiced some buried regret.

“Must be running from his past,” Montufar deadpanned. “All those women back home want him so desperately.”

Dumas tried to smile, but the attempt made him look ill.

Eduardo put a hand to his mouth as if to whisper, which he didn’t. “Then you’d better marry him, little sister, before they catch up with him.”

Everyone laughed, and several guests spoke at once. Peller felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to his neighbor. “When this circus is over,” Souter said in a low voice, “I gotta talk to you.”

*

At around nine-fifteen the party began to wind down, and by nine-thirty Corina and Sylvia had disappeared into the kitchen with the empty plates and dishes. Dumas and the Montufar clan waved goodbye as the clock was striking ten. A shivering Sylvia pulled on her coat as she walked out the door into a biting wind. Only Souter remained, resting comfortably on the old blue sofa, gazing at the family photos on the wall opposite him: photos of Peller and Sandra and their son Jason spanning some three decades.

Peller sank into an easy chair to Souter’s left and yawned. “I’m too old for this wild life.”

Souter waved off his comment. “Folks are as young as they think they are.”

“For some of us, it’s been a long year. But I expect you’re ready to lead another charge into battle.”

“If duty calls.”

Souter’s voice was sober—strained, in fact. That wasn’t like Jerry at all. Peller sat forward, studied the old man’s lined face and the firm set of his jaw, followed his dark gaze to the photos on the wall. “Is it calling now?”

Souter pointed at the gallery. “You got a fine family, there.”

Peller nodded.

“And you know what it’s like to lose someone.”

“What’s wrong, Jerry?”

Souter shifted and met Peller’s gaze. “Nothing’s wrong with me, son. Question is, what would you do if your boy up and vanished without a trace? You don’t know if he’s dead or alive, killed or kidnapped or just run away from home. What would you do to know?”

“Whatever it takes, of course. Why?”

“Friend of mine, a lady who goes to my church, is in that boat. Her grandson vanished.”

“When?”

Souter leaned back and contemplated the ceiling.

“Jerry?”

“Two years ago, Rick. Two years.”

Peller knew the feel of days stretching into weeks and months and years, of emptiness descending into numbness. “I assume she reported it at the time.”

“Sure. Your guys looked into it but came up empty.”

“When did you find out about it?”

“Just last week. I had a cold and didn’t go to church. Some of the folks thought I must’ve died in my sleep. Don’t know why they’d think that, but this lady volunteered to check up on me. I invited her in for coffee and we got to talking. I had no idea.”

Peller waited for the inevitable.

Souter looked sheepish, no mean feat for him. “I told her my neighbor was the best detective on the force.”

Peller couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah, I figured as much.”

“I know you guys got rules, but could you check up on it? Maybe see if something got missed?”

“I suppose, but don’t expect too much. I’m sure the investigators knew what they were doing.”

Looking relieved, Souter nodded his thanks.

“How much did she tell you about it?”

“The kid’s name is Jayvon. Jayvon Fletcher. He was living with his grandma Wanda and worked at an animal hospital. Christmas Eve he was pulling third shift, keeping an eye on the critters. He never came home. Your guys found a broken window and blood on the floor nearby. The back door was open, unlocked from inside. More blood on the back steps. Nothin’ else.”

“Sounds like a break-in,” Peller said.

“That’s what the cops told Wanda. They think Jayvon’s dead.”

Barring evidence to the contrary, Peller would have thought the same thing. “And she doesn’t want to hear that, of course.”

“No, but not knowing is worse. She’s hired and fired a couple PI’s and offered rewards and I don’t know what else.” Souter shrugged. “She just wants to know.”

“All right,” Peller told him. “I’ll look over the reports and see what I can see. But like I said, don’t expect too much.”

“I appreciate it, Rick.”

Peller yawned and stretched. “But,” he said lightly, “I’ll remember this next time I assemble the guest list for a party.”